

Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners With Disabilities in Urban Settings

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English-language learners with disabilities are capable of learning and are entitled to high-quality educational experiences. Their academic and social needs should be considered from multiple perspectives. To be effective, bilingual special education programs must implement best practices. This article highlights findings from research devoted to examining the influence of language on teaching and learning.

Keywords: *English language learners; disabilities*

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

—Paulo Freire

In the current climate of rethinking the structure of urban schools in the United States, efforts are underway to set high standards to promote better teaching and improve learning. Too often, the needs of English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities in urban schools seem to go unnoticed. Unfortunately, precise data on ELLs with disabilities in the United States are not readily available because many districts do not routinely identify these students as a distinct subgroup (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Cutting, Leos, & D’Emilio, 2005). Despite this limitation, McCardle et al. (2005) drew on U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and

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Rehabilitation Services, data to estimate that there were “357,300 LEP students designated as requiring special education services in grades K-12 in school year 2001-2002, representing 9 percent of all LEP [Limited English Proficient] students in U.S. public schools, compared to an overall 13.3 percent of children enrolled in U.S. public schools in 2000-2001” (p. 2). In this light, in the language of the U.S. Department of Education, the number of LEP students requiring special education services dropped 4% in 1 year. Absent any information about reduced numbers of ELLs with disabilities, the striking 4% decrease suggests that the needs of ELLs with disabilities in urban settings are not being met. Beyond those numbers, Davis-McCray and Garcia (2002) found that ELLs with disabilities who are receiving special education services are not making adequate progress because the “instructions they receive do not adequately address their sociocultural and linguistic characteristics” (p. 609). Interestingly, 40 years ago Dunn (1968) was raising questions about sociocultural and linguistic characteristics causing overrepresentation of minority children in special education. McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, and Leos (2005) found that there is “insufficient research to clearly identify and understand which cultural variables among specific subgroups of ELLs correlate to positive or negative educational outcomes” (p. 71). Educators have known for many years that ELLs with disabilities have difficulty succeeding in school and have recommended that those students be enrolled in bilingual special education programs. Instead of putting a Band-Aid on a superficial wound of differences, educators need to face the challenges and needs of ELLs with disabilities. These children bring a wealth of knowledge that teachers must see as an asset for building more academic and social knowledge (Rodriguez, *in press*).

Review of Research

Over the past decades, researchers have conducted and published studies that provide a consistent knowledge base related to the challenges of urban education (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Townsend, Thomas, Witty, & Lee, 1996). Yet there is a shortage of urban studies concerning ELLs with disabilities. This section considers research pertaining to (1) the erroneous placement of students in special education, (2) assessment of ELLs with disabilities, (3) developing academic language, and (4) multicultural education.

Erroneous Placement of Students in Special Education

One of the most pervasive problems in the field of bilingual special education is the erroneous assumption that if a child is bilingual, that child

must be placed in special education or received special education services. A language difference is not a disability. Students with language differences have different needs than students who have a language difference and also have a disability. Wilkinson, Ortiz, Roberston, and Kushner (2006) ascertained that "the distinction between actual disabilities and problems reflecting socio-cultural influences could be made more effectively by providing quality preferral interventions" (p. 130). Connor and Boskin (2001) discussed how "teachers' lack of knowledge of second language learning" leads to "a resultant inclination on the part of educators to associate bilingualism with disability" (p. 23). Furthermore, Connor and Boskin (2001) noted that ELLs with disabilities are challenged by the risks of educational equity. In other words, if students are ELLs and are from a low socioeconomic background, there is a high correlation that they will be placed in special education programs. Data from Artiles and Kozleski (2007) suggest that culturally and linguistically diverse students are more than three times as likely to be placed in special education settings.

Assessment of ELLs With Disabilities

ELLs with disabilities might be defined as bilingual students who are exposed to two languages and cultures and have identified disabilities. Alternatively, one may say that ELLs with disabilities are those students who, ideally, have been screened and evaluated using nondiscriminatory procedures, including assessment instruments in both languages. To follow a rigorous assessment and evaluation process in both languages, the multidisciplinary team or the evaluation team requires to develop an educational program designed to meet each student's specific needs. Assessment occupies a prominent place in the diagnosis and evaluation of ELLs with disabilities, and it is an important component in the preparation of bilingual special education teachers. Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (U.S. Congress, 2004) ensures the equal education of children with disabilities and guards against the placement of children into special education categories based on their cultural, linguistic, or economic status, we are still facing the challenge that there are inequalities in the evaluation and assessment process. Figueroa and Newsome (2006) presented a compelling profile of how the writers of psychological tests do not use extant legal or professional guidelines for making nondiscriminatory assessment practices. Connor and Boskin (2001) concluded, "the misuse of assessment instruments to place students in special education, particularly with language minority students, is well documented" (p. 28). Their study clearly indicates that urban school teachers' lack of information about proper

assessment tools and knowledge of second language acquisition contribute to the misplacement of the students in special education due to culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds rather than cognitive and physical disabilities. According to Wagner, Francis, and Morris (2005), "assessment of English language learners in English as opposed to their native language can be problematic in that individuals may not fully understand the task instructions even if they have the competence to perform the task in English" (p. 10). Furthermore, Arreaga-Mayer, Utley, Perdomo-Rivera, and Greenwood (2003) explore the conditions of "historical perspective, questions about test bias, issues related to psychological testing, factors associated with test construction, and the educational use of tests for English language learners, with and without developmental disabilities, have stimulated debates among psychologists, social scientists, and educators" (p. 29). However, MacSwan and Rolstad (2006) identified that "the practice of testing the native language ability of ELL students appears to have arisen from the expectation that such children may have inherent linguistic deficiencies, an expectation that is likely rooted in persisting deficit models in educational psychology and language minority education" (p. 2311). Therefore, ELLs with disabilities must receive accommodations throughout the evaluation and assessment process to ensure nonbiased procedures that do not cover up the skills and content knowledge they bring to school.

Developing Academic Language

Educators must view languages within perspectives and accounts of their societal status and the different sociocultural contexts that are viewed from different linguistics groups. Unfortunately, typical bilingual programs include instruction only in English as a second language, but some programs provide specialized instruction in English with native language support for content area instruction. Teachers need to master teaching basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) as it relates to students' culture. Instruction in English in cognitive areas begins when students can function in that language and experience no academic penalty due to insufficient knowledge of the language (Collier, 1992; Cummins, 1984; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Teachers need to use both the English language and the student's first language for instructional purposes, assuring not only comprehensible input but also a clear and positive environment and status for each language. McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, and Leos (2005) found that "what constitutes typical language development for bilingual children has been understudied,

with few published studies in the literature and small numbers of subjects in the studies that are published” (p. 70). According to Cartledge and Kourea (2008), ELLs with disabilities need experiences that encourage them to persist with school and other worthwhile endeavors. The primary language is the language through which students acquire more of their conceptual and academic development (Cummins, 1989; Krashen, 1988, 1999; Rodriguez, 2008). For ELLs with disabilities, the primary language is a language other than English, which is determined in the evaluation and assessment of students’ linguistics strengths and weaknesses. Background information and extensive vocabulary facilitates learning, memory, and manipulation of complex concepts (Herrera & Murry, 2005). ELLs with disabilities actively construct meaning using their language background and knowledge of materials as they use their primary language. The language ability of second language learners is usually based on the grammatical, phonological, and syntactical structure of the primary language. The primary and second languages play a critical role in the development of academic competence. For example, those factors that affect language development must be considered in the context of individuals with disabilities who are limited language proficient in the societal language, regardless of whether those factors are sociocultural or individual (Wagner, Francis, & Morris, 2005). A very important element is English as a second language. For most ELLs with disabilities, the basic language structure and vocabulary in the first language influences the information and knowledge that will transfer to the second language (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 2002; Cummins, 1989; Freeman & Freeman, 1999; Herrera & Murry, 2005). Language acquisition is based on comprehensible input (Herrera & Murry, 2005; Krashen, 1999). Vygotsky (1962) expressed his views by stating, “Success in learning a second language is contingent on a certain degree of maturity in the native language. The child can transfer to the new language the system of meanings he already possesses in his own” (p. 10).

What matters for ELLs with disabilities? What matters is *comprehensible input*. Comprehensible input refers to making the second language meaningful, contextualized, and understandable to ELLs (Herrera & Murry, 2005; Krashen, 1991) including those students with disabilities. Since language is recognized as the mode of representing thoughts and as a vehicle of complex thinking, the importance of allowing and expanding ELLs with disabilities to use the language they know best becomes evident. Teachers help ELLs with disabilities best when they provide scaffolding instruction to build on previous experience and build on new concepts that include visual learning, vocabulary and, communication practice and implementation and

the content of the class is meaningful, purposeful, relevant, and resourceful to their daily lives. There are myriad approaches to teaching English as a second language for students with disabilities. To name a few, these approaches might include cognitive language learning approach, and integrated content-based and specially designed academic instruction in English. In the same way, there are myriad bilingual models. These models might be a transitional bilingual model, two-way dual language program, and maintenance language model. These bilingual models and teaching approaches need to meet the needs of ELLs with disabilities by linking and correlating teaching approaches, methodologies, strategies, and techniques that will benefit these children and youth linguistically, culturally, cognitively, and socially. However, teachers not only need to understand first and second language development theories and practice but also need to have multicultural competencies to better teach their diverse student populations. These multicultural competencies include an ability to be aware of his or her own cultural identity and biases; to gain a cosmopolite view, which encompasses learning about worldviews of groups who are culturally different from himself or herself; and to develop culturally responsive teaching strategies that are inclusive of the cultural norms of all student groups (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

The important connection is the role of language and academic achievement between special education and bilingual education, without misunderstanding the distinction of the fields. It is critical for educators to understand the difference between language difference and language disorders. English language learners sometimes show signs of error patterns in the second language that might seem to be a language disorder. It is imperative that educators recognize and understand that these signs of error patterns in the second language is common and not to make unnecessary referrals because of communication disorders or speech impairment characteristics.

Multicultural Education

Teachers educating ELLs with disabilities must master integrating multiculturalism into the curriculum to engage, affirm, and accept diversity within the educational context of the classroom and school environment. The linguistic and cultural diversity of ELLs with disabilities poses the need for educators to build on the cultural knowledge possessed by language minority students. Drawing on this knowledge can help these students ease their way into a new language and culture, while still retaining their own cultural identity.

Teachers need to understand how students differ in terms of language proficiency, culture, and learning and cognitive styles. It is only when teachers have a clear understanding of the characteristics of their students that they are able to create learning experiences to support their intellectual, social, and personal development. Teachers can provide many opportunities to exceptional bilingual students to learn through relevant and meaningful academic activities. For example, for ELLs with disabilities, teachers can integrate biography cards that include information relevant to the sociocultural, cognitive, academic, and linguistic backgrounds of the students. In addition, instruction might include central themes intrinsic to the curriculum, such as ancient Egypt, African Kingdoms, Harlem Renaissance, or civil rights. ELLs with disabilities can also analyze or select movies, television shows, or newspapers to discuss critical media. This type of activity provides opportunities for students to learn and develop skills needed to take social actions. Teachers need to further their knowledge and education toward affirming, respecting, and promoting multiculturalism in the educational settings. Larson and Ovando (2001) stated, "Deliberative inquiry and formal processes of community sense-making can expose and discredit the inequitable claim of our dominant discourse in schools" (p. 4). In other words, multiculturalism in teacher education programs began its transformative evolution, but this transformation is only beginning and it needs to become a reality for ELLs with disabilities. Villegas and Lucas (2002) observed that "solely adding a multicultural education course or two to the teacher education curriculum cannot prepare prospective teachers adequately for a changing student population" (p. xiii). For ELLs with disabilities to make academic achievements, teachers have to understand, comprehend, and learn the stages of cultural identity, which Banks (2006) defines as (a) Stage 1: cultural psychological captivity; (b) Stage 2: cultural encapsulation; (c) Stage 3: cultural identity clarification; (d) Stage 4: biculturalism; (e) Stage 5: multiculturalism and reflective nationalism; and (f) Stage 6: globalism and global competency. These stages mean that educators must integrate and implement content curriculum experiences consistent with their levels of cultural identity (Banks, 2006). For example, Banks refers to cultural psychological captivity as the stage in which students take in negative beliefs and stereotypes of their own culture. Cultural encapsulation refers to when students believe that their culture is superior. Cultural identity clarification refers to when students can clarify attitudes and identity perceptions to reduce conflicts within themselves. Biculturalism refers to when students have a sense of cultural identity and are able to participate in both worlds, their own culture and the second acquired culture. Multiculturalism

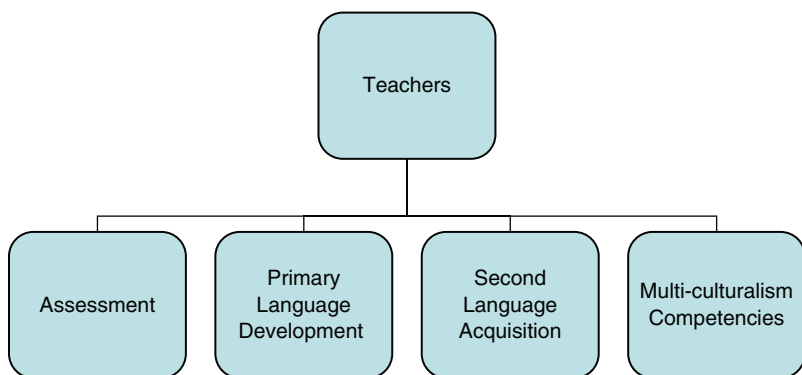
and reflective nationalism refers to when students reflected positively to both cultures. Globalism and global competency refers when students have an understanding to reflect of global identities issues to functions within various cultural groups. Furthermore, teachers working with ELLs with disabilities should and must be prepared in their teacher preparation program to ensure that these students gain the maximum, meaningful, and purposeful experience in their education. Villegas and Lucas (2002) suggest that for many teachers to succeed, they should be interested in (a) gaining sociocultural consciousness; (b) developing and affirming a positive attitude toward students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; (c) developing and acting as agents of change; (d) understanding the constructivist foundations of culturally responsive teaching; (e) learning about their students and communities; and (f) cultivating culturally responsive teaching practices (p. 26).

Greater emphasis is being placed in school curricula on factors that facilitate students' intellectual, academic, and social growth. One of those factors is developing academic language and multicultural competencies. Cartledge and Kourea (2008) stated, "Creating culturally responsive classrooms that include developing culturally competent teachers is a transformative process of the American educational system" (p. 366).

Figure 1 identifies crucial components in any effective model for teaching ELLs.

Any effective model for teaching ELLs with disabilities must include the components of primary language, second language acquisition, multiculturalism, and assessment. This will ensure that effective classroom instruction for ELLs with disabilities will address their sociocultural, cognitive, academic, and linguistic backgrounds. It is proposed that at the completion of the teacher education program, teachers must demonstrate competencies that demonstrate the following, to name a few: (a) knowledge of methods for monitoring students' progress; (b) ability to use various types of formal and informal assessment procedures; (c) knowledge of assessment information to make instructional decision, plan individual student programs, and suggest appropriate learning environments; (d) proficiency in two languages or having personnel to communicate in students primary language; (e) understanding the nature of bilingualism and the process of becoming bilingual; (f) understanding of structural differences between the child's primary language and second language; (g) ability to develop curriculum that integrates language content; (h) identify approaches of students' learning style and cultural diversity values; (i) plan strategies to respond positively to the diversity of behaviors involved in cross-cultural environments

Figure 1
Necessary Components of an Effective Model
for Teaching English Language Learners



and classrooms; and (j) incorporate multicultural activities, materials, and techniques related to content area curriculum.

Klingner et al. (2005) describe a set of practices to carry out culturally and linguistically diverse practices. For example, they suggest (a) teacher education: rethinking the context; (b) professional development that promotes culturally responsive teaching; (c) culturally responsive evidence-based instructional practices; and (d) culturally responsive early intervention. To emphasize these practices, we need to ensure that we have sensitive school leaders, culturally responsive teachers, and engaged families and communities.

Issues in the Field of Urban Education and Bilingual Special Education

As good as the extant knowledge base in urban education is, more works need to be done in the area of bilingual special education. First, there is a need to better understand the role of languages in the delivery of instruction. Progress along that line would address this shortcoming: “The influence of particular native languages on the learning of English must be understood if we are to develop appropriate educational instructional

approaches and interventions” (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, & Leos, 2005, p. 70). In addition, studies targeting specific variables could lead to (a) advances in nonbiased assessment and evaluation; (b) identification of indicators of successful academic achievement; (c) inclusion of multiculturalism in the instruction for ELLs with disabilities; and (e) identification of specific cultural variables of ELL subgroups that correlate with academic success. Unfortunately, data describing ELLs with disabilities in urban and other schools in the United States are biased and incomplete in that information is not provided on specific variables like school characteristics, type of bilingual programs, and staff profiles, which are significant contributors to the academic success of ELLs with disabilities.

Just as researchers can enhance their work, practitioners may improve by heeding best practices already evident in current literature. Bilingual special education has opened up new possibilities and territory for a new era of careful and effective implementation of programs for ELLs with disabilities. Failure to capitalize on these possibilities would further jeopardize the problems faced by ELLs with disabilities in urban public schools. Teachers are encouraged to focus on the strengths of ELLs with disabilities rather than on their disabilities. Also for the benefit of ELLs with disabilities, teachers are encouraged to provide inclusive educational experiences, which can take place with the use of a variety of curricular and instructional adaptations and techniques.

Conclusion

Although the urban education knowledge base is consistent and substantial, there is a need to continue research on effective and successful practices in urban education for ELLs with disabilities. The literature on bilingual special education demonstrates that ELLs with disabilities participating in bilingual education programs do succeed and show gains in linguistic, academic, and cognitive growth (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 2002; Paneque & Barbeta, 2006; Rodriguez, Parmar, & Signer, 2001). For ELLs with disabilities to succeed in bilingual special education programs, they need to be part of a school that promotes bilingualism and provides students with exemplary instructional practices. It is important that teachers understand prevention programs and prereferral strategies to avoid inappropriate placement in special education. It is also critical for teachers to understand stages in primary and second language acquisition and development. In a diverse society, teachers need to respect the language, culture, traditions, values, and beliefs children bring into the classroom. As the nation continues to become

more diverse, it is important to uphold universal values to recognize that academic access, opportunity, and equity are important to all learners, including English language learners with disabilities. This is a crucial time for addressing multicultural competencies. Teachers need to incorporate a theoretical framework that includes connections between assessment, primary language development, second language development, and multicultural competencies. Also vitally important is the need for teachers to reflect on their work. Reflective practice facilitates professional growth for educators teaching ELLs with disabilities because reflection helps teachers become aware of how their students learn and what they value. This leads to refined instructional practices and the potential to meet each and every student's individual needs.

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